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# Health, History, And Sugar: A Bioarchaeological Study of Enslaved Africans from Newton Plantation, Barbados, West Indies

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**Dissertation Abstract:  
Health, History, And Sugar:  
A Bioarchaeological Study of Enslaved Africans  
from Newton Plantation, Barbados, West Indies**

**By Kristina A. Shuler**

**Ph.D. Dissertation, Southern Illinois University Carbondale, September 2005.**

**Abstract:**

**Health and quality of life is assessed through the skeletal remains of 49 enslaved sugar laborers at Newton Plantation (excavated 1997-1998). Low life expectancy supports previous findings and more closely approximates historical demography than previous studies. Skeletal age and sex structures are skewed, with underenumeration of infants and children and more males than reported historically. Age at death is lower than previously reported for other Diaspora skeletal series, following historical expectations.**

**Skeletal evidence (as previously reported) attests to dietary inadequacy and a stressed population. High rates of growth arrest, hypercementosis, and caries suggest substandard, high simple-carbohydrate diet, with episodic starvation, but low rates of anemia and rickets support adequacy of some minerals and vitamins. Previously unreported stature estimates support skeletally and historically-documented low heights for Caribbean slaves in comparison with North American, but low mean age at death suggests individuals were dying younger, especially women. Associations by economy within the Caribbean were far less clear, due to few comparative samples. The physical effects of sugar cultivation were ubiquitous. Adult skeletal patterns conformed to historical accounts of the gang labor, but results in women, and even children, were surprising. Trauma was unexpected, affecting only women. Like other Diaspora skeletal series, Newton Plantation data suggest poorly nourished unhealthy individuals. Low age at death, absence of severe infection, with high rates of generalized stress, and low life expectancy support archival records of rampant acute epidemics and malnourishment in the West Indian enslaved. High rates of localized chronic infections attest to the physical dangers associated with sugar cultivation, especially to the lower body. Rare genetic defects (e.g., Kleippel-Feil Syndrome and supernumerary dentition) may suggest gene drift and bottleneck effects of the Middle Passage and isolated island and plantation contexts, but more data are needed to assess these potential familial relations within the cemetery. Future collaborative efforts may provide fuller understandings of the social relations and identity for enslaved Africans at this plantation.**